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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine certain social factors, such as sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic group, as they influence the speech of a sample of black and white children, aged 10-12, from a lower socioeconomic group in Albany, New York. The tapes of the interviews were analyzed to determine the usage of the nonstandard forms of four grammatical features, the multiple negative and the absence of suffixal -Z (i.e., absence of the suffix marking plural and possessive nouns and the third person singular form of the verb). The results showed that the race of interviewer and sex of child had little influence on the use of the four features, as compared with race of child, which was a factor influencing frequency of use of two of the features, multiple negation and the absence of the third singular marker. It is noted that any explanation of the large quantitative difference between the black and white children's realization of these two nonstandard forms must take into account differences in social interaction patterns and the expectancies of the two groups. Results of this investigation are compared with those of the Washington and Detroit studies. (Author/LG)

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DRAFT

Social Factors and Speech Variation: Some Observations in Albany, New York*

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Educators and linguists alike have shown a growing interest in the study of children's use of language. Educators have been concerned since it has been suggested that the language children use in school is closely linked to teacher attitudes toward them, and ultimately to pupil performance (Williams, 1970; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968.) Linguists in turn have demonstrated that social factors such as sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic group of speaker and listener may influence children's use of language (Fischer, 1958; Labov, 1966). The study described here is concerned with some of these social factors as they influence the speech of a sample of lower socioeconomic group black and white children in Albany, New York. The results reported are taken from twenty-five interviews of five white and seven black children, aged ten to twelve. The children interviewed were all pupils in an elementary school in Albany's South End, a neighborhood predominantly inhabited by black families. All of the children participating in the project come from lower socioeconomic class families, as do nearly all of the children in attendance at the school. School population is reported as roughly 85% black, and 15% "other", mostly white.[1]

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[1] The interviews were conducted in a lounge at the children's school and recorded on cassette tapes. Each child was interviewed by a black woman and a white woman at separate times. The interviews were not rigidly structured in terms of the questions posed or the nature of the topics discussed. Each child was encouraged to talk about what was of interest to him, and the children seemed to produce the greatest amount of speech when discussing favorite games, television programs and camp activities, and when describing friends and family members. While the relatively formal interview situation is limited in terms of how much natural, typical language behavior is actually produced, it has been noted (Shuy, Wolfram and Riley, 1967:16) that such a setting yields useful information about the speech used in a relatively formal setting, including the school. Since all children participating in this study were selected by school administrators, the data reported is likely to reflect "the linguistic consequences of being a lame" (Labov, 1972:255-291).

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The tapes of the interviews were analyzed to determine the extent to which the non-standard forms of four grammatical features were used. The non-standard forms considered here were multiple negation and absence of suffixal-Z (i.e., absence of the suffix marking plural and possessive nouns and the third person singular form of the verb). This data was then analyzed to determine how the social factors of race of the interviewer and race and sex of the child, may have affected the use of these forms.

In standard English, suffixal -Z is realized as /s/, /z/, or /iz/ on most plural nouns, possessives, and third person singular present tense verbs. It has been noted in studies of non-standard dialects, however, that suffixal -Z may be absent in the above three grammatical categories. In obtaining figures which represent how often the plural noun, possessive and third person singular verb were marked with the standard suffixal -Z form, the number of potential occurrences, i.e., the number of times marking or realization of the suffix was grammatically possible, was first tabulated.[2] Once the number of potential occurrences of a suffix was determined, the percentages of actual occurrence or realization of the feature could be computed. A similar process was used in computing the realization of the non-standard feature of multiple negation. (Absence of multiple negation is considered a standard feature in the discussion which follows, e.g., I don't have any is standard; I don't have none is non-standard).

This process of analyzing features in the speech of these twelve lower socioeconomic group black and white children yielded the data noted

[2] Due to the difficulty in distinguishing whether or not -Z was present when it was immediately followed by a sibilant or when the base form of the noun or verb under consideration ended in an /st/ cluster, these two types of environments were eliminated from the tabulation of potential occurrences.

in Figure 1. That figure summarizes data on four groups for the four features analyzed. The four groups are classed according to race of interviewer and race of child. Sex of interviewer is a constant (female). Sex of child is an uncontrolled and as we shall see, non-crucial, variable in this analysis. For the conversations as a whole, race of the interviewers had no sizeable effect on frequency of any of the four features for either black or white children. For frequencies of absence of two features, (i.e., the non-standard forms of the two features) plural and possessive, there are no sizeable differences which correlate with race of the children. For the other two socially significant features of multiple negation and third person singular, however, this difference correlating with race is considerable. A further analysis of the data displayed in Figure 1 reveals several facts about the language of the children studied.

Noun plural suffix absence occurred infrequently in the taped speech of the Albany children. There was only isolated occurrence of plural suffix absence in the recorded speech of both black and white children; all children used it where appropriate in over 90% of its potential occurrences. The potentials for using the plural suffix were 1,037 and 725 occurrences for the black and white children respectively. There are a few nouns which in black English do not regularly take the suffixal plural marker.[3] They are nouns such as movie, cent and year, which like the nouns sheep and deer in standard English, are subject to different rules of plural formation. It was noted however, that few of the unmarked

[3]The term "black English" is here used to refer to a variety of English often spoken by lower socioeconomic group black people. Not all black people speak black English any more than all white people speak a standard variety of English.

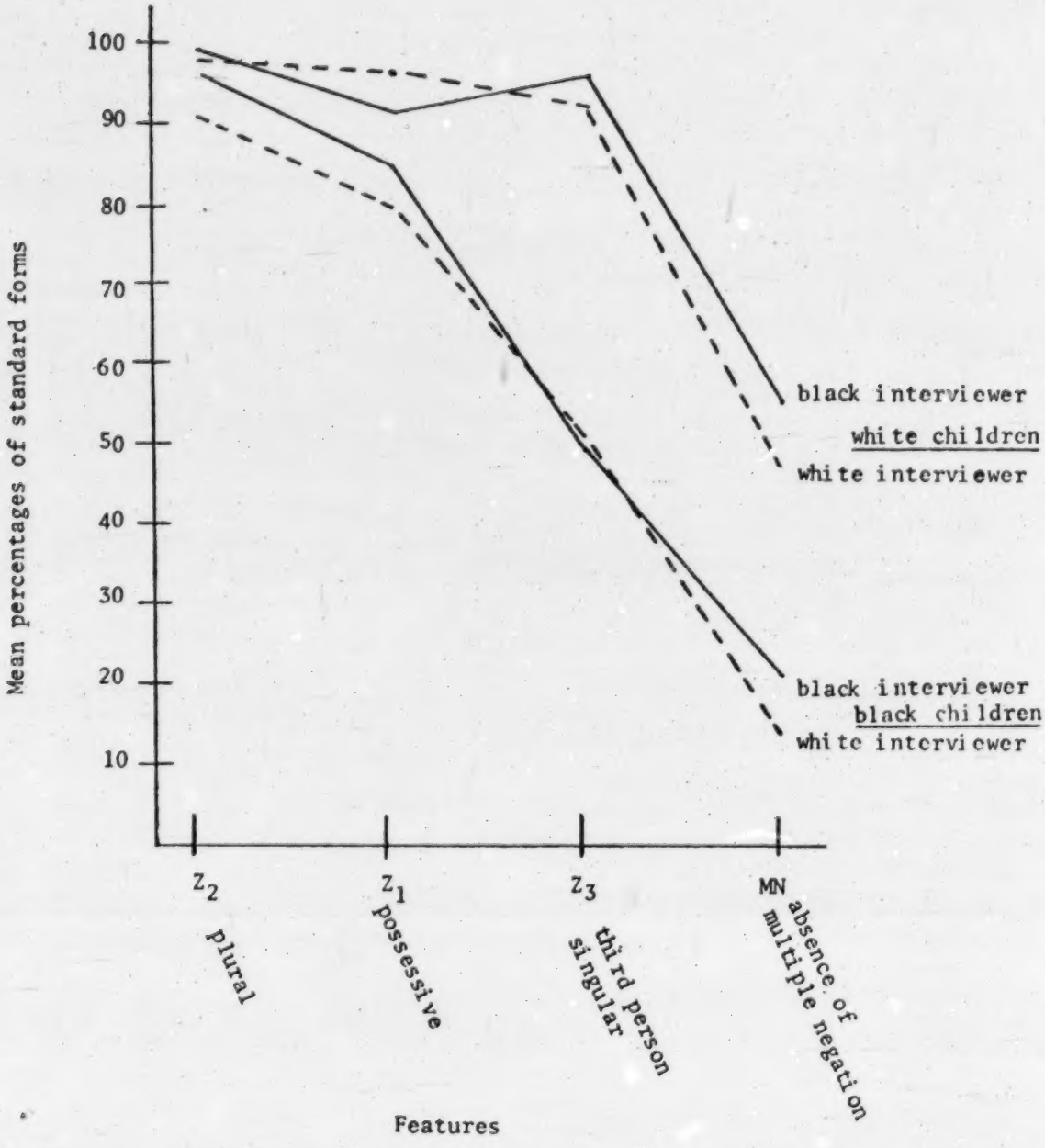

Figure 1. Realization of the standard form for four grammatical features by black and white children in twenty-five interviews.

nouns used by the children were words belonging to that special sub-class for which the plural is often absent in black English. These nouns, which occurred several times in the speech of the Albany children, were consistently marked with the plural suffix when the marking was grammatically appropriate.

Previous research has indicated that among speakers of black English, absence of the plural suffix occurs less often than does absence of the possessive suffix, and far less frequently than does absence of the third person singular present tense suffix (Fasold and Wolfram, 1970:78). After analyzing plural absence among adolescent peer groups in New York City, Labov (1968:163) noted that:

> "...the non-standard Negro English plural is quite intact, and the small amount of disturbance in the plural is the result of (a) phonological processes of consonant cluster simplification, (b) several individual items that have zero plurals in non-standard Negro English, and (c) a few individual speakers who show much less regularity in plural inflections than the norm for non-standard Negro English."

While Shuy's (1967) study of Detroit black English revealed that plural absence occurred more frequently among lower class children than among middle class children, the incidence of plural suffix absence was very low, even for the former group. An analysis of conversations of 10-11 year old black children in Washington, D.C. also revealed a low frequency of plural suffix absence, (7%), although it was noted that in those conversations where a relaxed, spontaneous atmosphere prevailed, the incidence of plural suffix absence was as high as 45% (Light, 1971: 158). A comparison of the figures reflecting plural suffix absence in the speech of the Albany black children with 10-12 year old Detroit black children,

and 10-11 year old Washington black children in the studies noted above, reveals that the Albany children tended to use the standard variant more often (96%) than either the Detroit or Washington children (93% for both areas.)

Previous studies have indicated that the possessive suffix is absent from the speech of those who use black English more often than is the plural suffix, but considerably less often than is the third person singular suffixal marker (Fasold and Wolfram, 1970:78). In studying possessive suffix absence, one must distinguish between the attributive and absolute possessive, for the suffix seems to be absent with much greater frequency from the attributive form. In his study of adolescent speakers in Harlem, Labov found attributive possessive suffixal absence over 50% of the time, while the absolute possessive was regularly marked (Labov, et. al., 1968:169). (Examples: This is my mother coat. The coat is my mother's.)

In Detroit, Wolfram (1969:141) noted a sharp stratification between middle and lower class adult black speakers in use of the possessive suffix, with a 27% mean percentage of absence in the lowest working class group and no absence among the highest middle class sample. An examination of possessive suffix absence in the speech of the sample of Washington children revealed the tendency of older children to use the possessive suffix more frequently than younger children (Light, 1971:162). Figure 1 indicates a low incidence of attributive possessive suffix absence among the Albany subjects sampled. For the black children, this absence averaged between 15 and 20 per cent. A comparison of the Albany, Detroit, and Washington figures reflecting possessive suffix absence shows that the black children in Albany demonstrated much greater use of the possessive marker (83%) than did comparable children in either Detroit (71%) or Washington (55%).

In studies of black dialect in other locations, the absence of the suffix marker on the third person singular present tense verb is found to occur with greater frequency than absence of either the possessive or plural suffix (Fasold and Wolfram, 1970:78). Since possessive, plural and third singular markers are all formed by the same phonological rules, quantitative differences in their realization must be accounted for by something other than phonology. The regularity with which third person singular suffix absence occurs has led observers to state that this suffixal marker is not a part of the underlying grammar of black English (Labov, et. al. 1968:168). This conclusion is supported by analyses of the irregular, hypercorrection patterns for this feature, indicating the black dialect speaker's basic unfamiliarity with the standard rules governing use of the suffixal marker on third person singular forms.

Some interesting patterns of variation in the marking of this feature were observed within the speech of individual children in Albany. For example, the following pattern of alternation between the marked and unmarked third person singular present form of the verb to go was noted in a black child's explanation to the white interviewer of the cards used in a Bingo game:

> "...you have Bingo on the cards, it says B, B go all the way up to fifteen, an' G go to to 29 or 30, yea, 30, 29, and I go, I go to 39, N goes to 30, 40, and G goes to 60 and after 60, the G goes to, yea, the N goes to 60 and the G go to 61 to 75."

Similar variations between absence and presence of the third person singular marker within the same sentence were observed in the speech of other black children in the study.

Wolfram (1969:168) found a sharp stratification among various adult black socioeconomic class groups in use of the third person singular marker, with absence of the suffix occurring rarely in the middle class groups and much more frequently among the lower class speakers.

The third column in Figure 1 summarizes third person suffixal absence for the Albany children. It indicates that this non-standard form was realized to some extent in the speech of all children, but that it was present a good deal more frequently in the speech of the black children. Given 422 potentials for use of the third singular suffix, the realization for the white children was 94%, while the potential of 365 for the black children was realized 50% of the time.

A comparison of the Albany, Washington and Detroit studies demonstrates that, as was the case for the plural and possessive suffixes, the percentage of absence for the third person singular marker was considerably lower for the Albany black children than for the subjects of the other two studies. A 50% absence for the Albany children compares with 80% and 81% for Washington and Detroit children respectively.

Multiple negation, the realization of an underlying negative element in more than one place in a sentence containing an indefinite pronoun, determiner, or adverb,[4] is a feature of non-standard white dialect as well as of black dialect, but there seem to be quantitive differences between white and black speakers' usage of this construction (Wolfram, 1969:153).

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[4] In tabulating potential multiple negation constructions, every incidence of a negative sentence occurring with pronoun, determiner or adverb was counted. Excluded from the tabulations were instances in which negation of a pre-verbal auxiliary preceded by a negative indefinite was possible. This procedure for analyzing incidence of multiple negation was essentially the same one used in the other studies cited in this report.

The study by Shuy, et. al. (1967:12) of black dialect in Detroit revealed a clear-cut stratification of multiple negation across black socioeconomic class groups, with a 77.8% mean percentage of realized multiple negation in the speech of the lowest working class adult blacks, and an 8.2% mean percentage of occurrence for the same feature among upper middle class adult black speakers.

The figures representing frequency of multiple negation in the speech of the Albany children are given in the last column in Figure 1. This indicates that multiple negation was present in the speech of all the subjects, but that it was realized with considerably higher frequency among the black children. Use of multiple negation averaged 50% for the white children and 80% for the black children. Put another way, the standard form was used 50% of the time by the white children and 20% by the black children.

As for the other three non-standard forms, the use of multiple negation by the Albany black children was somewhat less frequent than for comparable children in Detroit and Washington. Realization of multiple negation for the Albany children was 80%, while for Detroit and Washington, it was 90% and 81% respectively. For all four features considered in this study, then, the black children in Albany consistently showed a higher percentage of the standard form of those features than did comparable children in Washington and Detroit. We might speculate that the social dynamics in a relatively small "upstate" city, as opposed to those in large urban centers such as Washington and Detroit, might contribute to an explanation of this fact. The fact that children participating in the study were selected by

members of the school administration, and thus might, in many cases, be considered "lames" (Labov, 1972), may also suggest a partial explanation. Variables in the interview settings in the three cities might also have contributed, but it will take work beyond the scope of this study to explain with some confidence these consistent differences between cities.

Perhaps it is also well at this point to recall that the basic processes for formation of all four features examined are the same for all children in the sample. The process of realizing a negative on more than one item in a sentence, for example, is the same for all children. It is only in the frequency of use of this process that quantitative (not qualitative) differences appear across races in the Albany study. Further, as Burling (1973:49) has noted for the third person singular marker:

> "...by clinging to the third person singular -s, standard English still stops short of complete regularity [in verb forms], but this is only the final relic of a far more elaborate earlier system. When black speakers drop the -s, they simply take the ultimate step in regularizing the English verb. They lose nothing in meaning."

We might speculate then, that the higher percentage of third person singular marker deletion displayed by black children in this study and others, may in fact be an advantage in terms of efficiency of communication. This may be so since the third singular marker dropped (e.g., the -s of comes as in He come here everyday) is in fact redundant.[5]

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[5] This is not to say that deleting the suffix here is not disadvantageous in other respects. A child using such forms in school is likely to be the object of censure by teachers who hear them used. If teachers could be shown that this and other socially stigmatized forms are in most cases every bit as effective and efficient for communication as the socially approved forms, then they may be less likely to stigmatize children for using them.

In the discussion above we noted that for the conversations as a whole, race of interviewer had no sizeable correspondence with frequency of any of the four features in the speech of the twelve children. We also noted that race of child did not correlate to a sizeable extent with two of the features examined (plural and possessive markers). We did note a correspondence between frequency of use of two socially significant features (absence of third singular marker and multiple negation), and race of child. To check these observations, we made three additional analyses, with two variables matched and one tested. Results of these analyses are noted in Figures 2-4 below.

The first analysis matched race of interviewers (white) and sex of the children (female) and tested for a relationship between race of the children (three black and three white) and use of the four features. Results of this analysis, outlined on Figure 2, offer tentative support for the initial observation that there are sizeable differences between the black and white children in realization of the two socially significant features of multiple negation and absence of the third singular markers. This analysis also supports previous observations that the possessive and plural markers are not often absent in the speech of either black or white children. One might, in view of the previous discussion, have expected a spread of more than 14 percentage points between groups for multiple negation. A low number of potentials for this feature may in part account for this spread.

The second analysis, in which sex and race of children are matched, supports the suggestion that in the formal interview setting, race of interviewer has no consistent effect upon realization of the standard form for the four features (Figure 3). In conversations with the black inter-

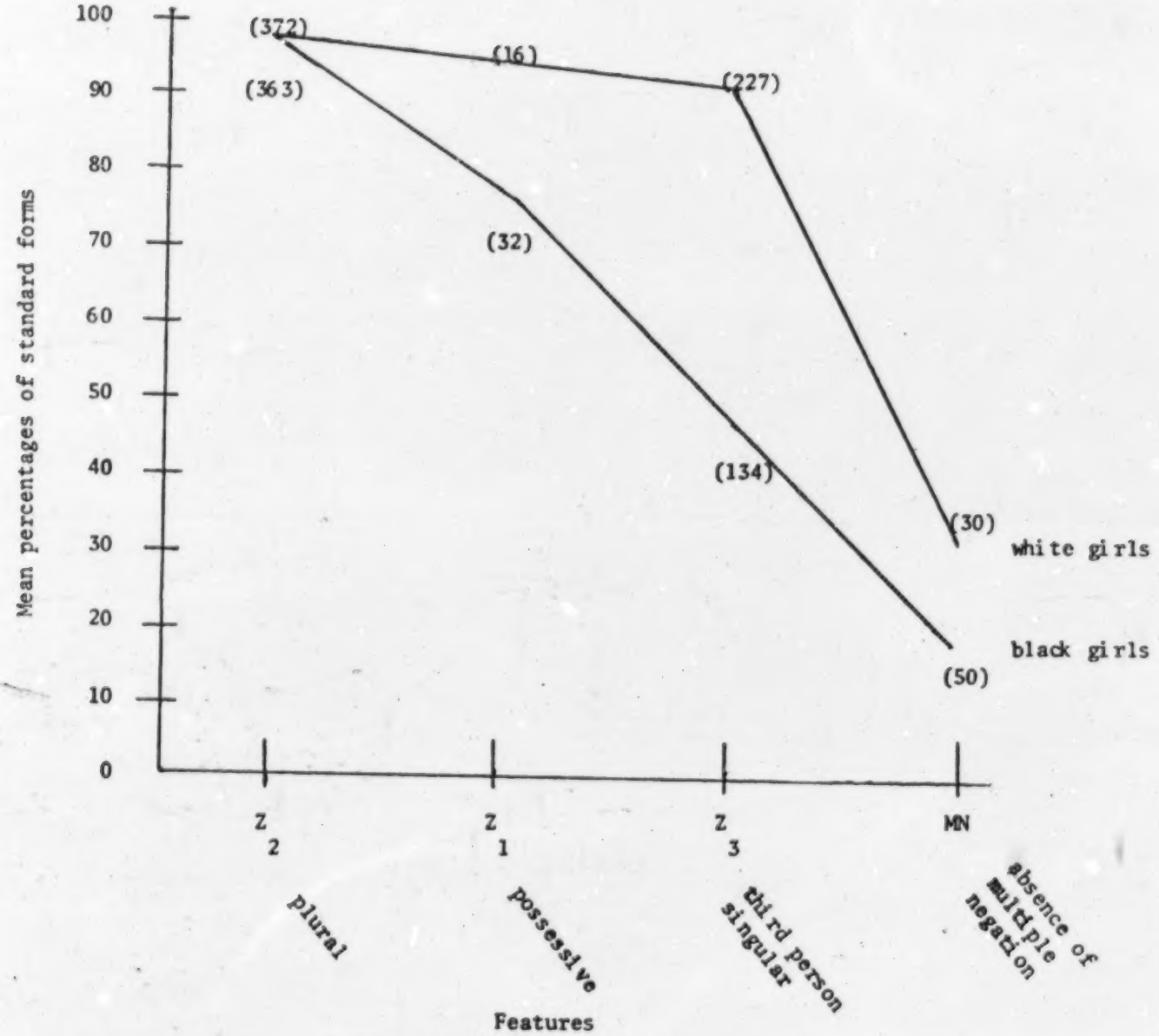

Figure 2. Realization of the standard form for four grammatical features by three black and three white girls with a white female interviewer. (Figures in parentheses indicate potentials, i.e., grammatically appropriate contexts, for realization of each feature).

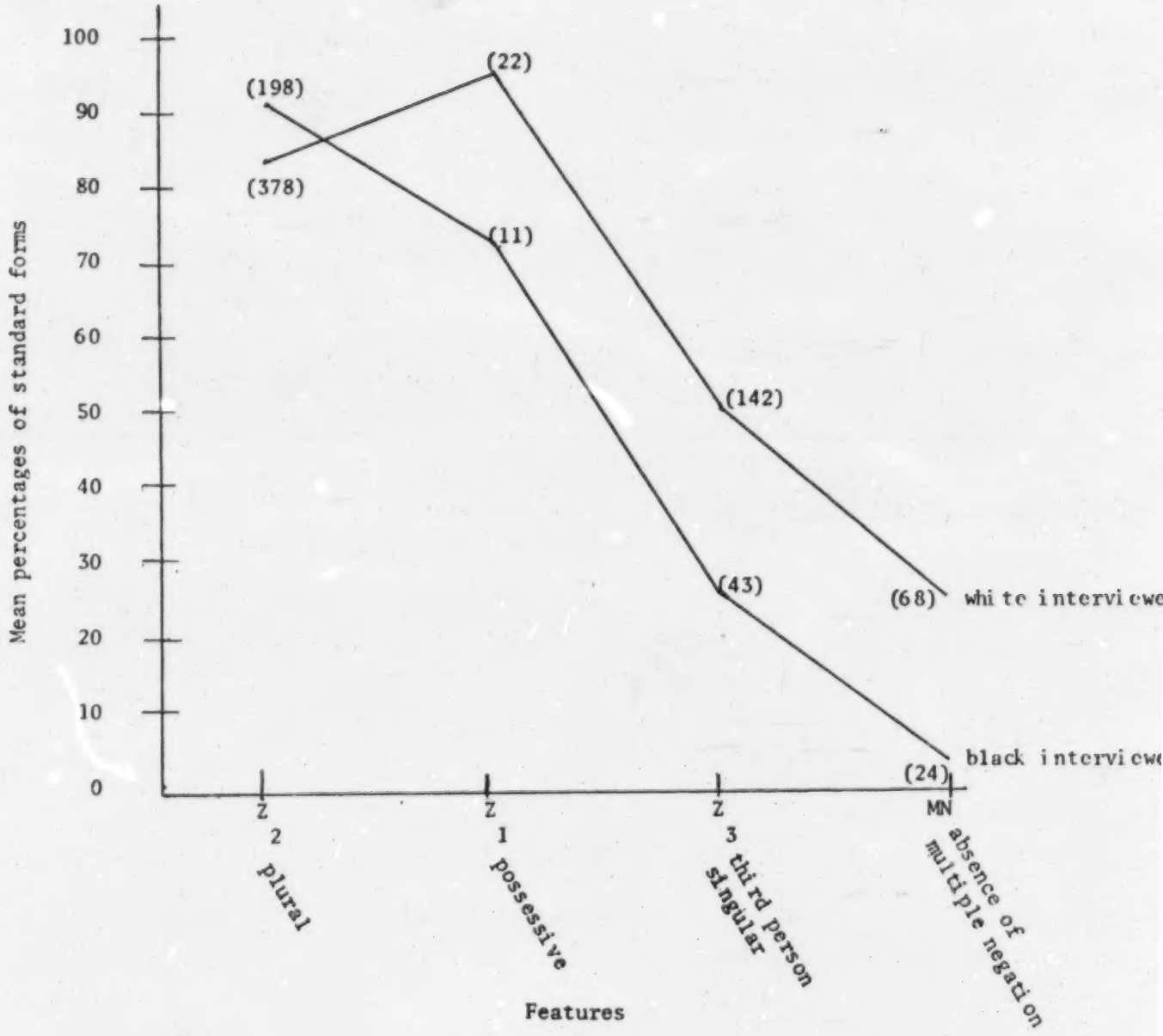

Figure 3. Realization of the standard form for four grammatical features by four black male children with black and white interviewers (female). Numbers in parentheses are potentials for realization of each feature

viewers there were more standard realizations of the plural marker, but fewer standard realizations of the other three features among the black male children tested in the sample. However, for these other three features (possessive, third singular, and multiple negation) there are differences of 22%, 25%, and 22% respectively in standard realization which correlate positively with a white interviewer. Thus the initial observation that race of interviewer had little effect upon the speech of the twelve children as a whole, must be tempered by this finding. A partial explanation of the apparently inconsistent influence of race of interviewer upon the four features in this analysis may again be due to the small potential for their realization.

The third analysis (Figure 4) indicates that sex of the child had no consistent effect and little influence in general upon realization of any of the four features. Some previous reports (Fischer, 1958; Fasold and Wolfram, 1974) have noted sex-correlated differences in use of standard and non-standard forms, with females more often using the standard forms than males of comparable age and background. On the other hand, Politzer et.al. (1974:31) has noted a lack of sex-correlated ability by black children on a standard/nonstandard English repetition test. Brown (1973) has speculated that increasing lack of sex-correlated differences in the use of certain speech features can be traced at least in part to the current emphasis upon equal rights for women. This study can contribute little to that argument. Further studies may explain the apparent lack of sex-correlated differences in recent studies of childrens' speech,

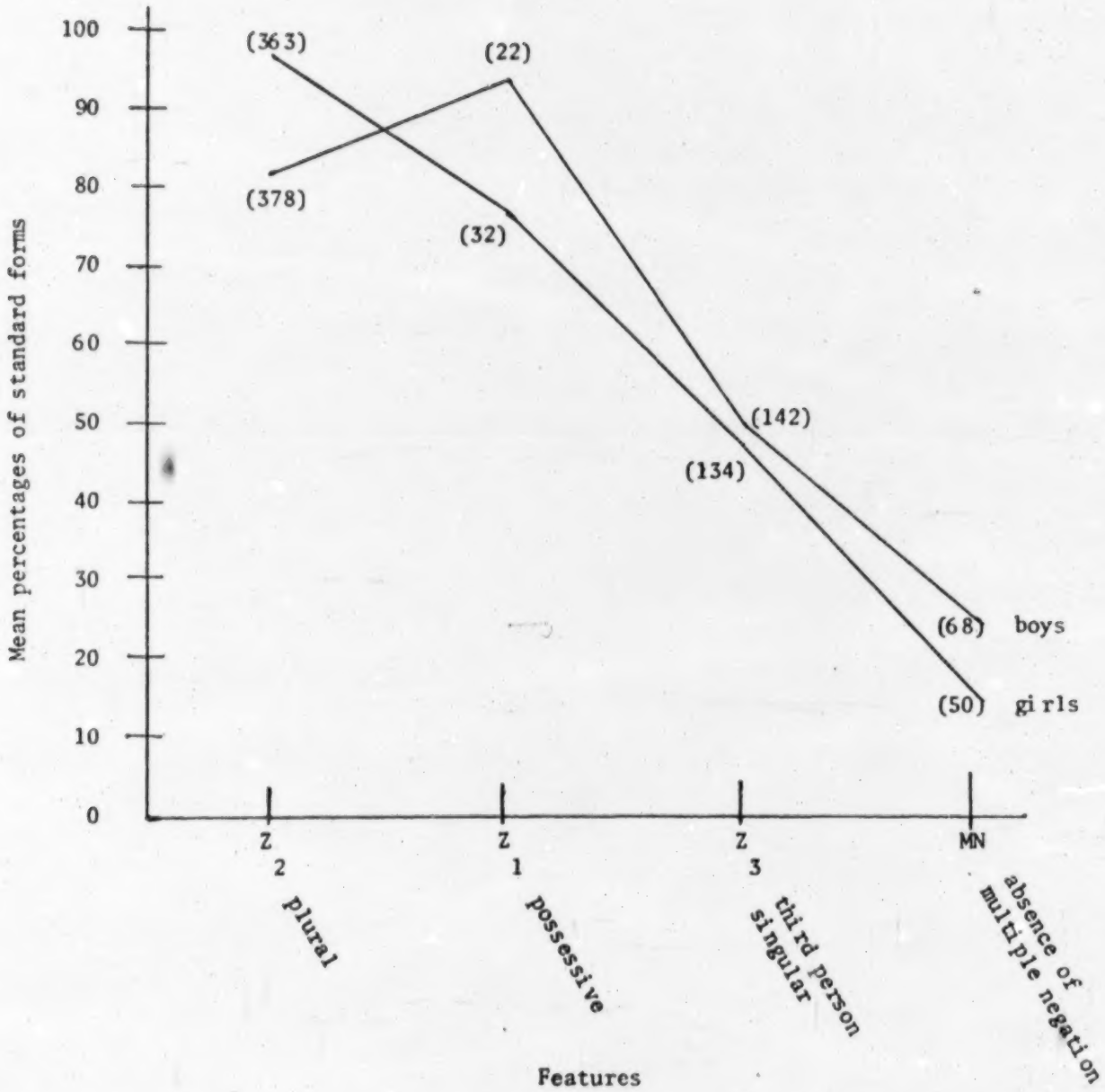

Figure 4. Realization of the standard form for four grammatical features by four male and three female children. Race of interviewer(white) and of children(black) are matched.

including this one.

In sum, for the twelve black and white children interviewed, race of interviewer and sex of child had little influence, as compared with race of child, upon use of non-standard forms of those features examined. We noted also that all white children in the study used the non-standard form of these features to some degree in their speech. This finding suggests two possibilities:

1) if these white children speak standard English, then speakers of standard English do not realize the standard form of these features one hundred percent of the time. This would support Shuy's (1970) view of a "linguistic continum" relationship between standard and non-standard dialects.

2) the white children may be incorporating non-standard black English variable rules in their grammar.

Partial support for one of these suggestions may be forthcoming from a current study to determine occurrence of these features in the speech of middle class black and white children in a suburb of Albany.

Race of child was a factor influencing frequency of use of two of the four non-standard forms examined. As might be expected, those two forms corresponding most highly with race of child are those socially significant forms highly stigmatized by the majority culture. Any explanation for the large quantitative difference between the black and white children's realization of these two non-standard forms must take into account differences in social interaction patterns and the expectancies of the two groups. We know that these two forms (absence of third singular marker and use of multiple negation) are disparaged by

representatives of the majority culture (Burling, 1973). It may be that the white children who are more often in intimate contact with representatives of that culture, feel the pressure to "conform" (i.e., use standard forms) to a greater extent than black children. These white children may also perceive for themselves, to a greater extent than is possible for the black children, a role in that majority culture whose social values, including linguistic values, they will be called upon to endorse. These differing social perceptions on the part of children are likely to be significant considerations in any attempt to account for differing verbal behaviors, including those which have been noted here. Further research is called for to determine relationships between language variations, these perceptions, and other social factors before we can with some certainty account for the linguistic variations noted in this study.

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